DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 112 955 JC 750 468

AUTHOR Watson, Rollin J.
TITLE Letters from Jessup: Notes on a Prison College Program.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Correctional Education; *Correctional Rehabilitation; Counseling; Financial Support; *Junior Colleges; Library Services; Outreach Programs; *Prisoners; *Social Adjustment; Tuition
IDENTIFIERS Essex Community College; Maryland (Jessup)

ABSTRACT

The Essex Community College (Maryland) full-time college program for maximum security inmates at the House of Correction at Jessup evolved as a natural outlet for numbers of the high school graduates which the prison secondary school was producing. Students proved to be well prepared, highly motivated, and well received by other inmates and the security guards. Students were paid the same remuneration they would earn in state use industries. This money, supplemented by federal grants, veterans benefits, and scholarship funds, helped to pay tuition costs. Despite the fact that the college and prison are located in different counties, inmates were permitted the in-county tuition rate, on a contract basis. A full range of library services was afforded to the inmate students by providing a computer print-out of college library resources and by supplying ordered materials by means of a regular van delivery service. While there was no budget available for a full-time college counselor, a select group of counselors were organized into a "pool" system. The program seemed to accomplish two things: it engendered a feeling of self worth and pride in the inmate-students; it afforded the students a new, positive perspective on traditional values and the institutions of society. (NHM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED112955

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

LETTERS FROM JESSUP:
Notes on a Prison College Program

In an inmate society, one of the true "specialists" is the letter writer, that "formulator of bold locutions," who, for a pack of cigarettes or two, fulfills the function of the ancient scribe, composing almost any kind of epistle from poetic love letter to formal business communique. He is equally conversant in the patois and in the standard tongue, and can plead or blister at will. One is reminded, on reading a "real" letter written by a person with such innate talent, in this case a thirty-five year old man who is now also a college student, that it is human beings -- rather than the subject matters of our disciplines or the other complications of academic life -- which are the real enigma, the real challenge to our worth as educators. Such complexity of mind as this man's is not easily understood, and the attempt on the part of a mainstream insitution, which is dominated by a middle class suburban mentality, to "teach" such a man is a formidable undertaking. This is not only not our "typical" student, but his whole orientation may be so far from the axiological assumptions which underlie our whole effort that the most feasible strategy for us to take, at least in the beginning of our effort, is on an entirely intellectual basis. If we try to teach "values" -- however clandestine they may be, we may be shocked to find them unacceptable to one who has always looked at society from the outside and who is not at all inclined to overlook society's shortcomings, as we are. Prison is an "underground" which inculcates its own kind of cynicism.

At any rate, this particular letter tells of the experience of a "conversion", of a new freedom, achieved in college classes taught in a maximum security prison by

JC 750 468

a community college. One wonders: no doubt this man could have written this same letter for someone else before he had taken college classes; yet there is a convincing ring of sincerity in it. It is a profound irony, yet a simple reality, of which it tells--of the intellectual freedom followed by a kind of moral conversion discovered in physical incarceration. It avers that by offering him a chance to take a few college courses we have provided him with a very personal rehabilitation. Why should the writer lie about his "conversion"?

Sadly, rehabilitation has become an outmoded word because in a conservative era its assumptions seem so idealistic, so "liberal". Instruction in intellectual matters does seem to be a quicker route to one's ethical motivations than does the teaching of a trade, but most government money which would be used to support a program such as this is tied to a practical, career orientation. This writer would venture to conjecture, however, that of the few real successes in rehabilitative efforts--such as the one described in this letter from an inmate at the House of Correction in Jessup, Maryland, where Essex Community College is offering classes--the most conspicuous, and hopefully the most lasting successes have been those concerned with higher education. Perhaps naturally enough, community colleges have been leaders in the field of prison education; in several states, notably in Michigan, Florida, and New Jersey, community colleges have conducted successful programs. The efficacy of these programs may not be obvious to the public, but to the insiders who watch light streaming all around a curtain of repression, there is very little that is more certain than their worth. Of course, rising crime rates do not engender popular good feeling about programs for prisoners, and the recovery of lives lost to society is always given less attention than the protection of society from them. This is natural enough. "Lock up" talk is as common with presidents as it is with men in the street.

The Essex Community College program has been well received by correctional administrators and by prominent politicians. The difficulty in obtaining funds

for the program from state and federal sources seems to have been experienced because the inception of the program came at a time when such programs are no longer novel enough for the federal bureaucracy to pour money into them. It is an extremely excruciating process trying to get total commitments from any governments, local or federal, in this time of short money.

No doubt popular apathy toward our correctional systems is the greatest obstacle to improved programs in rehabilitation in the prisons. Since often times enlightened prison administrators are burned for their audacity, jeremiads from "liberal" sectors of the society do not help them. Educators want to do such programs, but they do not have the political power to institute them. Those politicians who support educational enterprises must do so cautiously. Because they are responsive to their communities, perhaps the community colleges have the greatest chance of providing these first college programs because they have a commitment to the "practical humanism" embodied in the term "community service." Yet, the additional involvement of concerned citizens on the outside can speed the process greatly. This is a most important lesson which we have learned in our experience with prison education.

Next to institutions, many inmates are most suspicious of "do-gooders", because they have seen so many inspired transient purveyors of social change come and go. But do-gooders are of diverse types, and sincere do-gooders with an acute sensitivity to little things and a lot of gall can do more than bureaucrats would dream of doing. The Essex Community College program for full-time students, which is now in its third semester, grew out of the concern of two volunteers that while inmates in minimum security situations have access to educational opportunities,

prisoners in maximum security facilities rarely can take college classes. The House of Correction is a state prison with a population of about 1,700, with inmates serving sentences for every conceivable offense from drunken driving to murder. The two volunteers, Mrs. JoAnn Parochetti and Mrs. Marianna Burt, were so committed to finding a way to start a college program at Jessup that they didn't let any of the several brush-offs they experienced discourage them. They handled educators, bureaucrats, and politicians perceptively, consequently finding solutions to some difficult problems.

At the same time, it was fortunate that Ralph Williams, the Warden at the House of Correction, was entirely sympathetic to the project. It is a myth, of course, and a very deleterious one, that all prison officials are stormtroopers who are concerned only about security matters. Mr. Williams, the first black warden in the state of Maryland, is a deeply commited official who has not allowed security consciousness -- which, as warden he must maintain -- to obfuscate his vision of a better correctional system. The Director of Education, Peter Donohue, had, previous to the inception of the college program, set up in the prison school an excellent primary, secondary, and college preparatory program, and he too was very interested in bringing in a college program. Together with Mrs. Parochetti and Mrs. Burt, he had worked hard in preparing the way for the college program, which would be a natural outlet for numbers of the high school graduates which the school was now producing.

After the program had gotten underway, and the first twenty-six students were hard at work with their four classes, a local newspaper reporter came to the prison to write a story about the program. He found, and conveyed in his story, an openness which surprised him. He saw a kind of rehabilitation going on that perhaps he did not expect: he saw students and teachers and prison officials communicating in an ambience of hope; he saw a lack of racial or political tension; further, he noted the seriousness with which the students treated their

studies. More important perhaps, he saw citizens from the outside society making a contribution to the inner society of the prison.

The college students have gained new status within the inmate society. Thanks largely to Warden Williams, students are paid the same remuneration they would earn in the state use industries. This, together with a built-in respect for knowledge which the prisoners have, affected postively the prestige of those participating in the college program. The inmate society has its own class structure, and those with "professional" skills are highly regarded by their peers.

Strangely enough, the college program was well received by security guards in the prison, who did not seem to resent this opportunity for the inmates. No College staff member or inmate - student received harassment from the guards. Quite to the contrary, the guards cooperated in every way possible to help the College staff and the students. Again, it is to Warden Williams' credit that this attitude prevailed.

Several misconceptions we had before classes started were radically altered once the courses were underway. The students in our classes were not only well prepared but they were also highly motivated, hungry for knowledge, and anxious to obtain preparation for a different life on the outside. We had worried that the college program might be "used" as an escape from work. We wondered if the prisoners would think it would be an easy way to get a degree. They were not looking for an empty degree program though. They sincerely wanted to, 1) understand their own behavior, 2) comprehend the intricacies of American culture, and 3) develop the ability to communicate their own feelings.

Time to study is not the only reason why inmates make good college students. A more significant factor is their desire for the opportunity of self-discipline, which is a very important kind of freedom. The attrition rate in the classes was much lower than that of normal college classes, and this personal quest for freedom through self determination appeared to be the main reason why.

The inmates' desire to understand their own actions heightened this impetus for self-discipline. One comes to terms with himself sometimes by forcing himself to face some rather unpleasant facts. The students devoured psychology, because it offered the most immediate lead-in to this understanding.

For some of the students, the college program was the first positive experience with society they had had in several years. One remarked that he had never believed a college program would actually come, in spite of all of the disclaimers by prison officials and volunteers that it was expected. Prisoners develop a suspicion of all promises that cannot be granted immediately, and most thought the talk of a college program was illusory. For the first few weeks of class, some had to keep reminding themselves that they were actually taking college classes.

Since most of the students in the program were black, they had a deep-seated feeling that this might be another of white society's attempts to deceive or even placate them. They suspected ulterior motives -- for one thing, they thought that the college would want to conduct psychological experiments or use them in some experimental way. They also feared that their money would be taken and then the program cancelled. Happily, these suspicions dissolved as classes got underway.

We were extremely fortunate in our first semester at the prison in our selection of instructors. While only one of them had had previous teaching experience in a correctional setting, all four were personally as well as professionally motivated to conduct the classes at Jessup. They went to the prison with the attitude that students there should receive the same instruction as on-campus students, and the amount of work meted out to the students soon convinced them that there was to be no patronizing: they would have to work. All four instructors felt at the end of the semester that their teaching experience in the prison had been the most challenging and rewarding of their careers.

The instructors encouraged communication between the prison students and those on the campus. Several student leaders visited the prison for "rap sessions," and come away with an increased awareness of the intense need of the inmates to communicate with the outside world as part of their "rehabilitation." The inmate students seemed to enjoy learning about the life-styles of the on-campus students at the same time.

Counseling has to be an important part of a college program in a prison, and without it inmates may not be able to see how course work can lead to positive career objectives. There are difficulties connected with providing counseling, though, and they must be faced. The ideal situation would be to have full-time college counselors working directly with staff psychologists and counselors. But the counseling staffs at the prisons are already woefully inadequate, and sometimes their caseload is so heavy that they see a man only once or twice during his entire time of incarceration. When there is no budget available for a full-time college counselor, the best solution seems to be the use of a select group of counselors on a "pool" system. Counseling dates are scheduled into a semester calendar, and the Director of Counseling schedules in whichever counselors are available on these dates. The disadvantage here is that some continuity may be lost when one counselor establishes rapport with an inmate, and then is unable to return for the second and third visits. It is difficult to do "odd-hour" counseling with inmates because of the rigidity of a prison's routine.

Follow-up on an inmate when he leaves the prison and wishes to come to the campus is part of the counseling effort, and is an additional reason why continuity is important in the counseling staff. If the inmate has been taking a "General Studies" curriculum while in prison, and wishes to make a change to a more specialized program, it is imperative that he see a counselor prior to embarking on the new program. Also, at the time of release, many inmates need information on how to apply their college credits toward obtaining employment.

Applications for the second semester of the Essex program were almost double those of the first. Since the classroom space was limited, admissions were made on the basis of the students' preparation, as determined by an interview, tests, and high school grades. A waiting list of eligible persons was developed for future semesters.

In the first semester, all of the students paid tuition obtained through BEOG, SEOG, Veterans benefits, and scholarship funds. The search for additional funding was probably the most difficult part of the program as far as the College was concerned. A dynamic president and a sympathetic Board of Trustees permitted the students the in-county rate on a contract basis because the College and prison are located in different counties, and this was an important step forward.

Another valuable contribution was made by the College library, which had been, under the direction of Mrs. Mildred Fields, the first in the state to be fully computerized. A full range of library services was afforded to the student by the simple expedient of installing a print-out of all library resources in the school and by supplying ordered materials by means of a regular van delivery service. In addition, Mrs. Fields supplied several hundred volumes of second copies to the prison School which it was not necessary to return and which became a part of a satellite library in the School.

The letter from our inmate-student suggests that the College program has accomplished two things. First, it has changed the thinking of many of the inmates about themselves. It has engendered a feeling of self-worth and instilled a sense of pride in their accomplishment. Secondly, it has changed the attitude of some toward the institutions of society. The students have found that not all of them are repressive, not all of them are threatening to the individual. To one who has always lived outside society, higher education in the prison affords a revealing glimpse of the inside. For the student, it offers a new perspective on traditional values, arrived at in a rational way. Rehabilitation, after all, is the adjustment

of one's point of view from outside of society to inside it. This letter could be the vision of a new beginning for one man. In other parts of the country there are others like it. Someday, perhaps, such letters will be a commonplace.

Rollin J. Watson

Associate Dean
Office of Continuing Education
Essex Community College
Baltimore County, Maryland 21237

UNIVERSITY OF CALIF.
LOS ANGELES

OCT 3 1 1975

CLEARINGHOUSE FOR
JUNIOR COLLEGES